10 Steps to Getting Healthy Before Pregnancy

What you do before pregnancy can help you and your baby have a healthy pregnancy.

1. Take folic acid. Take a multivitamin with 400 micrograms of folic acid every day. Taking folic acid before and during early pregnancy can help your baby's brain and spinal cord develop properly. Look on the label of the vitamin bottle to see if it contains the necessary amount of folic acid.

Eat a healthy diet that includes foods that contain folate, the natural form of the vitamin. Such foods include fortified breads and breakfast cereals, beans, leafy green vegetables and orange juice.

2. Get a checkup before pregnancy. Preconception care is medical care you get **before** you're pregnant. The goal is to evaluate your health and identify health and lifestyle risks that may affect your pregnancy.

One of the most important steps you can take to have a healthy pregnancy is to see your health care provider before you conceive. Your provider can help you be as healthy as possible before and during your pregnancy. Ideally, you should see the provider who will take care of you during your pregnancy, although you also can visit your primary care provider.

Don't forget about dental health! See your dentist before you get pregnant. If there's any chance you may be pregnant, tell your dentist and wait until after the baby is born to have dental x-rays.

3. Eat right and maintain a healthy weight. You'll feel better and start your pregnancy off right if you eat a variety of nutritious foods every day. Avoid foods high in fat and sugar. Eat foods from each of the five food groups: fruits, vegetables, proteins (like chicken, fish and dried beans), grains, and milk products.

Cut back on caffeine. Limit the coffee you drink to no more than one 12-ounce cup of coffee each day. Remember, the amount of caffeine in coffee varies, depending upon the type of coffee, how it is prepared, and the amount of coffee used. Caffeine can also be found in soft drinks, medications and other foods. Try coffees and teas that are decaffeinated, or drink water, milk or juice. Be sure to read labels on food, drinks and medicine to know how much caffeine you're getting.

For more information about eating right, read the March of Dimes fact sheet about food-borne illness and pregnancy.

Try to get to a healthy weight before you get pregnant. If you're **underweight** (weigh too little), it may be easier to get pregnant if you get to a healthier weight. If you're **overweight** (weigh too much), try to lose weight before you get pregnant. Check with your health care provider if you're unsure what your ideal weight is. It's not safe to try to lose weight once you're pregnant.

4. Stop smoking and avoid secondhand smoke. Smoking may make it harder for you to get pregnant. If you smoke while you're pregnant, your baby is at greater risk for being born prematurely or too small. Smoking during pregnancy increases the risk of pregnancy complications and SIDS (sudden infant death syndrome). The best time to stop smoking is before you get pregnant. If you need help, ask your health care provider for advice. Smoke from other people's cigarettes can also be harmful. Try to avoid secondhand smoke, too.

To get help for quitting, see the March of Dimes fact sheet about smoking during pregnancy.

- **5. Stop drinking alcohol.** Drinking alcohol (beer, liquor, wine and wine coolers) can make it harder for you to get pregnant. Drinking alcohol before or during pregnancy can cause your baby to have conditions that can create lifelong problems like:
 - Fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), a combination of physical and mental defects
 - Low birthweight
 - Heart defects, growth problems and problems with brain development

If you need help to stop drinking, ask your health care provider.

6. Don't use illegal drugs. Taking illegal or "street drugs" during pregnancy is risky for mother and baby. Women who use cocaine are at higher risk of miscarriage and preterm labor. Babies exposed to heroin are likely to be born addicted. Babies exposed to illegal drugs also are more likely to have learning or behavioral problems later in life. Women who use methamphetamines or marijuana may have babies that are too small. If

you need help to stop, ask your health care provider.

7. Avoid infections. Some infections can harm a developing baby. Wash your hands well with soap and water after using the bathroom, blowing your nose or touching soil. Avoid potentially unsafe foods such as raw meat and fish and unpasteurized milk products. Wash all fruits and vegetables well. If you have a cat, ask someone else to change the litter box. Stay away from rodents, including pet mice, hamsters and guinea pigs.

Find out if you have a sexually transmitted infection (STI). Without treatment, these infections pose special risks for pregnant women and their babies. At a preconception visit, ask your provider about screening tests for HIV or other STIs. To avoid STIs, have sex with only one person who doesn't have any other sex partners and who doesn't have an STI.

- **8. Limit exposure to hazards.** Avoid hazardous chemicals, like cleaning supplies and insect killers. Stay away from strong-smelling cleansers, chemicals and paint. You may reduce your risk by wearing rubber gloves and working in a well-ventilated area. If your water pipes are old, you may want to have them tested for lead or drink filtered or bottled water. Ask your health care provider for advice about hazardous substances and chemicals.
- **9. Learn about genetics.** Your health care provider will take your health history and ask about the health of members of your family. Based on this information, your doctor or nurse may recommend that you see a genetic counselor to learn about your risk of having a baby with a birth defect. For more information, see the Birth Defects and Genetics section of this Web site.
- 10. Avoid stress and get fit. Too much stress may be harmful for you and your baby. High levels of stress may increase the risk of preterm labor and low birthweight. Start reducing stress now. Identify causes of stress and try to reduce them. Ask partners, family and friends for emotional support. Or get professional help. Use relaxation techniques, such as deep breathing. Call a hotline or ask your health care provider or another trusted person for help if you're in a relationship where you're in danger of being harmed. This could be verbal or physical abuse.

Exercise regularly and get fit. Exercising for 30 minutes on all or most days of the week is a good way to help maintain or lose weight, build fitness and reduce stress. If you aren't already exercising, now is a good time to start. Talk to your health care provider about fitness activities that are right for you. Some good choices before and during pregnancy include walking, swimming and yoga.

Don't forget to help Dad get healthy, too! To improve your chances of getting pregnant, it's important for your partner to take care of himself, exercise, eat right and stop smoking, drinking or taking illegal drugs.

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For more information on preconception, healthy pregnancies, pregnancy and newborn complications or prematurity, please visit our web site at http://www.marchofdimes.com/

Para más información sobre la preconcepción, la salud durante el embarazo, las complicaciones en el recién nacido y el nacimiento prematuro, por favor visite nuestro sitio Web en http://www.nacersano.org/